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Upchurch, Martin ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9143-993X> (2014) The internet, social media and the workplace. *International Socialism* (141) . pp. 119-138. ISSN 0020-8736 [Article]

Published version (with publisher's formatting)

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The internet, social media and the workplace

Martin Upchurch

There have been heated debates on the left over the last few years on the role of the internet and social media through web based communication (WBC). In an article in *International Socialism* two years ago Jonny Jones reviewed these debates and correctly highlighted the dangers of overestimating the impact of social media on social movements.¹ While new information and communication technologies, including social media, have undoubtedly aided the organisational efforts of social movements, they have not created them—and it would be technologically deterministic to put the cart before the horse in assessing their value. Writing from a Marxist perspective against “techno-centrism”, a leading academic on social media, Christian Fuchs, has criticised explanations of rebellions in which social media is perceived as the engine, claiming it to represent a “fetishism of things...a deterministic instrumental ideology that substitutes thinking about society with a focus on technology”.²

The tendency to inflate the value of WBC as a motor engine of movements reflects a body of thought which over-emphasises the societal impact new technology may have had in encouraging spontaneous protest and societal change. For example, Anthony Giddens, from a postmodern perspective, has argued in *Runaway World* that “instantaneous electronic

1: Jones, 2011.

2: Fuchs, 2012, p386.

communication isn't just a way in which news or information is conveyed more quickly. Its existence alters the very texture of our lives, rich and poor alike".³ Manuel Castells, in his monumental trilogy *The Information Age*, also places information technology as the root of modern social change, whereby the net replaces hierarchies as the dominant form of social organisation, and the individual constructs her self-identity within the same technologically based process.⁴ A vision of work in which material production has evaporated into a weightless world is also presented as "postmodernisation" by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*, where they argue that there are now no fixed boundaries or territorial centres of power. Instead we are bounded by a world where power lies "both everywhere and nowhere".⁵ This new world is dominated by service work and "immaterial" labour, which itself embraces universal cultural "products", knowledge and communication, to such an extent that industrial production:

has been informationalised and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself. Manufacturing is regarded as a service, and the material labour of the production of durable goods mixes with and tends toward immaterial labour.⁶

Such approaches, of either the postmodern or postmodernisation variety, sidestep or corrupt not only the material basis for change, but also the importance of the agents of change historically rooted in class formations and class struggle. In his book *New Capitalism* Kevin Doogan describes such sidestepping of class as an academic expression of *dematerialisation*, whereby the "death" of distance and time lends to the concept of a weightless world, in which there is a separation of motion and matter. In such a vision we appear to move beyond technocentrism into a world where the transmission of knowledge becomes a fetish in itself. This is despite the important fact that "the production and consumption of knowledge remains materialist even if its circulation is immaterial".⁷

A task that confronts us, therefore, is to bring such theories of weightlessness and dematerialisation down to earth by examining the impact of communication technology in the everyday concrete existence of the workplace. More importantly, we need to examine these technologies in terms

3: Giddens, 2002.

4: Castells, 2000.

5: See Choonara, 2005.

6: Hardt and Negri, 2000, p293.

7: Doogan, 2009, p50.

of processes of class-based struggle. In so doing we need to do more than rehearse the debates concerning the fetishisation of social media and social movements within the general cultural sphere. It is imperative to focus on the impact of communication technology in the workplace, at the point of production, if we are to fully understand its implications. A number of issues are of concern to contemporary Marxist analysis. First is the power of employers to use communication technology to intensify work through changes in the labour process. Second is the potential liberating power of communication technologies for collective workplace organisation against the employer through trade unions. Third is the effect such technologies may or may not have on tipping the locus of power between rank and file and bureaucracy within the trade unions themselves. In addressing these areas of concern some reflections will be provided on current industrial disputes where new communication technologies and social media have been a central feature.

Routinisation and standardisation of work

For Marx, technology is a tool used by individual capital to produce reductions in the “socially necessary labour time” that capital must achieve if it is to remain competitive. “Socially necessary” refers to the labour time required under normal conditions with the average prevalent skill and intensity that determine the value of commodities. Individual capitals can thus gain by upgrading skill, increasing work intensity and reducing unit labour costs by improving productivity. Similarly capital can increase the length of working time expected of each worker in a week or year. The former acts to increase rates of relative surplus value and the latter increases rates of absolute surplus value. Socially necessary labour time is not a fixed absolute and is constantly moving in determining the parameters of value, so individual employers want to try to exceed the notional average to gain a competitive advantage. This is the root of competition between capitals, which reduces to continuous efforts by individual capital to intensify work in order to maintain or increase rates of exploitation.

In modern management this process is taken to its logical conclusion by construction of a “bell curve” in “performance management”. In this practice the bottom 10 percent of performers as identified by their appraisal scores are regularly culled in an organisation, in an effort to raise the overall level of performance. As Jack Welch, the retiring CEO of General Electric and an advocate of bell curve measurement, stated in his final shareholders’ letter, “We must remove that lower 10 percent, and keep removing it every year—always raising the bar of performance and increasing the quality of

its leadership”.⁸ Thus the modern workplace has seen a shift towards individual performance measurement and performance related pay, not only in terms of measuring physical output but also in terms of attempting to measure abstracted forms of labour through soft competency measures such as ability to work with others in teams, attitude, “innovation” and “leadership”. This process has been accompanied with attempts to introduce “lean” production management, typified by the elimination of waste and buffers in the production process, not only in manufacturing but also in public services and education.⁹ “Doing more for less” has become the leitmotif of the new workplace. One key feature of new communication technologies in the workplace is the opportunity it presents to employers to further routinise and standardise everyday work tasks, and to simultaneously measure work performance in order to “weed out” the less productive. Labour productivity is enhanced, either through intensified work or by replacement of everyday tasks with technological innovation.

Of course, such processes of technology-related work intensification and measurement are not new. Efforts to standardise times and tasks follow practices first established in the inter-war years such as the application of the Bedaux system of measuring work and time, and Gilbreth’s time and motion study. Both systems deepened and extended F W Taylor’s system of “scientific management” whereby an ultimate division of labour was constructed under full management control. The effects on the labour process were enormous: by intensifying work effort, deskilling and establishing norms of output they acted to create standards of working by which capital could adjust to the socially necessary labour time in the production of manufactured goods.¹⁰ In the post-war period such forms of measurement rapidly expanded into service and clerical work, whereby the time taken to complete even the simplest work tasks was measured against banks of photographs for the task created under the Methods Time Measurement system established in the United States in 1948.¹¹

Digitalised communications technology takes the process of work measurement a number of steps further. First, instead of self-filled work diaries, or time and motion inspectors, work output and speed can be

8: Go to www.citehr.com/76182-bell-curve-appraisal-system-employee-database.html#ixzz2THEpZgd9; See also Gary, 2001.

9: Carter and others, 2011

10: See Braverman, 1974, for a classic account.

11: For a contemporary version see the handbook of MOST (Maynard Operation Sequence Technique) Work Measurement Systems (Zandin, 2002).

measured remotely and instantaneously.¹² Thus the work output of checkout assistants at supermarkets can be measured by collating the swipes of bar-codes, and the insurance or tax office “clerk” no longer works on a single claim but is confined to one discrete task which flashes up on her computer screen only to be replenished immediately as soon as the first task is completed. In such a way monitoring through computerisation not only fills in the “porosity” of the working day by restricting personal opportunities for down time but also reduces discretion of the individual worker by removing context from the decision-making process. Reducing porosity in the working day can even be taken to include time allowed, or rather time not allowed, for normal bodily functions such as going to the toilet. Warehouse workers and forklift drivers at Tesco, for example, alleged that radio-linked (RFID) armband tags were being used to monitor work rates and identify those staff spending too long in the toilet.¹³ In Ohio a security firm has gone one step further and implanted RFID chips in two of its employees.¹⁴

Second, new communication and web-based technologies allow the employer the opportunity to extend the reach of monitoring and surveillance beyond the more easily measurable work output into all aspects of work. Such extended reach has been assumed by some theorists (we shall return to a critique later) to justify use of Foucault’s *Panopticon* effect borrowed from Bentham’s earlier writings on prisons.¹⁵ In this depressing and Orwellian scenario the envisioned prison tower, which enables all prisoners to be seen by the guards but which cannot be seen by the prisoners, is used to express hidden obedience in the workplace. It is argued that surveillance and monitoring induce internalised effects in employees whereby compliance is created even though the monitoring is unseen.¹⁶ In this perspective, new technologies increase the intensity of this effect through their extended reach over and beyond the traditional tools of compliance and control.

In addition, we have seen a rapid spread of web-based monitoring into professional and service related work, where output measures are less easy to define and more qualitative in nature. For example, the UK coalition government since 2010 has sought to increase the use of targets and “standard” setting in schools as a method by which to encourage “choice” in the sector and to intensify teacher workloads as a cost-saving exercise. Targets and scores are now openly published, thus commodifying both the

12: Two useful studies are Danford and others, 2003, and Boreham and others, 2008.

13: Rawlinson, 2013.

14: Waters, 2006.

15: Foucault, 1995.

16: Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992.

school and with it each individual teacher's "output". In terms of target-setting an ICT system for monitoring student performance (SIMS—schools information management system) has been widely introduced throughout the school system. SIMS monitors student behaviour and attendance (linked to automatic text messages to parents and carers if a student is absent); creates a Schools Workforce Census of teachers' professional qualifications and training and records students' marks and achievements throughout the school year (giving the teacher an "alert" if not filled in on time). In such fashion information held on the teaching staff and their individual students is universal.

Most importantly, SIMS acts to "colour code" the achievement marks of the students set against expected grades based on past achievement. These "expected" grades are outside the control of the individual teacher as they are set at line manager level and measured for consistency across schools (taking postcodes into account) by external advisers. In this way students falling behind their "expected" grades are immediately identified, as are the teachers who are teaching the below expectation students. Should an individual teacher record too many codes of the "wrong" colour this will be made apparent to the headteacher through monitoring of the system. This information is then fed through to the performance objectives and targets set in the appraisal system, and can be used as both a disciplinary tool and as a potential indicator for performance related pay. In Marxist terms what emerges is an attempt, however clumsy and proxy, to measure the "abstract" labour of teachers and to utilise this measurement as a yardstick of socially necessary labour time.¹⁷ No matter that the quality of education to pupils might suffer, as teachers are now incentivised to focus on "border-line grades" and pay less attention to low achievers in the class. What count for the government are targets, outputs, and competition within the new market created by agendas of competition and commodification.

Similar processes can be found in social work, whereby targets are set for child adoption and protection, or caseload turn-around, irrespective of the need to ensure that the right decisions are made with due professional consideration.¹⁸ In both cases a by-product of the process is an increased sense of alienation of teachers and social workers, as they are restricted in exercising professional judgement and forced to work more intensively and without considered reflection by cutting corners in order to meet targets.¹⁹

17: Marx, 1975.

18: For a description of such processes in social work see Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004.

19: Such fears of target setting have also affected the robustly conservative Police Federation,

New technology and workplace surveillance

The ability of WBC to enhance opportunities for commodification of information comprises the third area where change is apparent. In particular the rise of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has given employers an extra opportunity to monitor, spy upon and ultimately discipline and control employees. Running in parallel are government efforts to monitor and spy on email and social media conversations by use of keyword driven technologies such as that used by Operation Tempora at the UK's intelligence agency GCHQ. Twitter was launched in 2006, but now records over 360 million daily tweets, while Facebook recorded its one billionth user in October 2012, before losing 10 million users early in 2013 as privacy concerns began to worry users. In this brave new world of online social media, virtual "images" are bought and sold as opposed to any "physical embodiment of what they represent" in terms of value and labour.²⁰ A process of commodification of culture is therefore engendered.

It is not just time and place of work that is eroding through the fleeting and flexible logic of networks, but labour itself is made controllable by its suppression to targets and abstract standards of performance and behaviour. Thus employers may use individual tweets and Facebook profiles as pre-screening before interview, picking up on our identities (however we may wish to construct them) and indiscretions, recording the types and number of friends, and scanning photographs and "likes" to build up a picture of social and political habits, gender, age and skin colour. A survey conducted in 2011 by the US Society for Human Resource Management found that 56 percent of companies surveyed used social media scans before engaging in recruitment trawls, up from 34 percent in 2008. A quarter of organisations explore social media profiles before offering jobs.²¹ The perniciousness and subjectivity of this process are plain to see. A further study in the US found, for example, that social media profiles which exhibited that an individual had a liking for alcohol consumption made them less likely to be offered a job than those whose profiles emphasised family orientations.²²

Of course, while employers use social media to their own advantage they are also aware of the threats it may pose to their authority and ability to control work time. As an attack on so-called "cyberloafing", employers

who are claiming that government statistics showing a fall in crime may be misleading, as officers are encouraged to manipulate the statistics and underrecord crime. See Barrett, 2013. 20: Grassman and Case, 2009, p175.

21: Go to <http://journalistsresource.org/studies/economics/jobs/social-media-workplace-research-roundup#>

22: Bohnert and Ross, 2010.

have now moved en masse to ban social media on workplace computers. A survey conducted in the UK in 2010 reported that 79 percent of the 1,765 employer respondents have now banned social network sites on their computers.²³ In 2009 Portsmouth City Council banned its 4,500 employees from using social network sites such as Facebook after finding that the staff logged on to the sites up to 270,000 times a month between them (on average equivalent to three times a day). The council says that staff can apply to have their accounts unblocked if they use them for work purposes. Such an exemption might include a fraud officer carrying out checks on claimants to ascertain their lifestyles are what they claim they are.²⁴

However, coercion and Taylorisation as forms of control are not the only ways in which compliance and consent may be manufactured in an organisation. As Michael Burawoy suggested in his book *Manufacturing Consent*, employers may offer the “illusion of choice” to employees as a subtle form of co-optation.²⁵ Rasmus Johnsen and Marius Gudmand-Høyer have turned conventional “control and compliance” arguments somewhat on their head. Instead of being coercive and alienative forms of constructing subjectivity, such processes of target-setting and organisational moulding of the employee may (depressingly) serve to fulfill a sense of “lack” in the individual.²⁶ In other words, even though soft human resource management tools of control linked to communication technology may lack “humanity”, and engender alienation by quantifying abstract labour, it might be the very process of observation, target setting and feedback which instils in us a sense of worth.

Such potential insights have been enacted (albeit by default) by some employers who, rather than fear the internal uncertainties and threats from WBC, have embraced the technology and sought to utilise it to create an organisational atmosphere where the related sense of lack is converted for the benefit of the organisation. Indeed, the drift towards all-embracing digitalised information on ourselves is reinforced in the Quantified Self movement whereby individuals constantly self-track their vital health signs (blood pressure, heart rate, temperature, etc) and plot them against their self-observed moods or immediately after eating, physical exercise or sexual activity.²⁷ Smartphone applications such as Vine now allow individuals to

23: Martin and others, 2011. However, banning social media on work PCs is a fairly pointless exercise, given the increasing use of smartphones with WBC technology.

24: Reported 27 September 2009—see Kisiel, 2009.

25: Burawoy, 1979.

26: Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010 p10.

27: Go to <http://quantifiedself.com>

share immediately a range of information not only on their current activity but also on their immediate surroundings with their personal networks in a constant stream of video. While some may argue that such developments liberate the individual others will sense employers and corporations sniffing at the potential use.²⁸ Health insurance companies may take particular interest. IBM already has a tool to identify “unhappy” employees.²⁹

It is not only before the employment contract is offered that the boundary between personal and work lives has been blurred by the onset of WBC and social media. Returning to the case of teachers, the current workload dispute has been partly fuelled by an insistence by the government that teachers adhere to new “Teachers’ Standards”. The new government issued standards, effective from September 2012, aim to “assess teachers’ performance against the standards to a level that is consistent with what should reasonably be expected of a teacher in the relevant role and at the relevant stage of their career”.³⁰ Headteachers are expected to refer to the standards when making their judgements and to implement those judgements through the appraisal system. The colour coded SIMS information, described earlier, forms part of the performance assessment alongside a range of 25 competencies, which include a section on personal and professional conduct. It is this latter clause which affects the private sphere of teachers’ lives beyond the boundaries of the school gate and which focuses on “not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs”. There is no further definition of “fundamental British values” given but the inference is that any action outside the political mainstream might fall foul of an individual headteacher’s judgement.

Most trenchantly, the issue of teachers engaging with social media such as Facebook and Twitter more generally is very much to the fore. Argyll and Bute Council in Scotland has already banned its employed teachers from blogging about work after an incident when one head of department in a school blogged about three boys with Asperger syndrome in her class.³¹ The case sits alongside other more high-profile dismissals of bloggers or internet-based social networkers that have already occurred in the UK, with employees of Waterstones bookstore, Argos retailers, the Prison Service, and Virgin Airways, to name a few. Such “inappropriate”

28: Finley, 2013

29: Go to <http://phoebevmoore.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/self-tracking-and-the-quantified-man/>

30: Department for Education, 2013, p3.

31: Kemp, 2009.

use has usually involved alleged abusive remarks by employees directed at clients, customers or service users. However, for teachers and lecturers the problem of separating the public from the private is particularly severe. A US based sociology professor, for example, perhaps naively, allowed “friends of friends” to see her Facebook musings about students, leading to complaints from students. The professor was suspended, and, as her university policy document correctly if not sympathetically stated, social media sites “blur the lines between personal voice and institutional voice...privacy does not exist in the world of social media”.³²

The most high profile instance of an employer’s use of social media against employees came in the 2011-12 British Airways (BA) cabin crew dispute. The cabin crews’ tightly organised union Bassa (an affiliate of Unite) had organised 22 separate strike days and was beginning to have a real impact on CEO Willy Walsh’s ability to run the airline. In a desperate retaliatory move one weekend BA management moved decisively against both Bassa and individual supporters of the strike in a series of disciplinary moves aimed at the use of Facebook, email networks and text messages. The strikes had begun to force BA onto the back foot, so much so that BA were forced to ask pilots to volunteer for cabin crew training to act as strike-breakers. As pilots were being recruited BA made its move against the union activists. More than 40 cabin crew were disciplined as a result of their support for the strikes and 15 were dismissed.

Of the disciplinary cases 18 were connected to Facebook postings, text messages, emails and postings on Bassa or the airline pilots’ Balpa online forum, with three of the 18 specifically concerned with private Facebook postings to “friends”. The union suspected that BA’s internal security force, Asset Protection, had been involved in preparing these cases by covertly gaining access to private postings in email, Facebook or text message form. Despite the bitterness of the strikes, and what could have been said in the “heat of the moment”, the majority of postings chosen for disciplinary action were mild in content. An example is a female cabin crew staff member who asked on Facebook for a list of the pilots who had volunteered for training as strike-breakers. She was charged with bullying and harassment and given a three-year final warning, demoted one grade and barred from promotion. Another male cabin crew member said he had a list of “volunteer” pilots but did not know what to do with the list as “he knew one of them personally”. He was dismissed. A second male staff member was dismissed after he used the word “scab” in a text message sent

32: Stripling, 2010.

in error to someone he thought was a friend.

Pilots posting much more derogatory material against the strikers received no disciplinary action, or at maximum mild rebuke. An example is a male pilot and Balpa representative who posted on Balpa forum “F**k off Bassa you lying malevolent bunch of hypocritical self-serving c**ts”. He received an informal verbal warning. All of those dismissed were known to be active strikers and these included a female cabin crew member and Bassa representative who was sacked for “gross misconduct” for the “way she represented” each of those members disciplined.³³

Such is the “dark side” of employers’ use of WBC and social media to monitor, spy and discipline worker activists. But what of the other side? Can workers collectively use social media and WBC to organise and fight back against the power of capital?

Distributed discourse?

The self-disciplining effect of the Panopticon envisaged in the workplace and beyond by Foucault has already been described. For some commentators this nightmare is reality, with predictions of apocalyptic total management control in the workplace as every move and every mistake by employees is monitored and instantly recorded with the aid of information technology. ICT and WBC, in this perspective, increase the intensity of this effect through their extended reach over and beyond the traditional tools of compliance and control. Two academics at the London School of Economics, Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, for example, refer to the effects of computer telephony as rendering “perfect” the control in the hands of management in a call centre environment.³⁴

Their account of such an Orwellian nightmare has been rebutted by Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, who focus on the resistance offered by employees within call centres by individual or collective acts of sabotage and defiance.³⁵ The authors identify a contradictory process defined by the tension between quality and quantity of service which allows for call centre workers to overcome the constant monitoring, either by individual acts of resistance, by the use of humour or by joining trade unions to fight collectively for better working conditions and pay. Measurements of both quality and quantity are, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on employee goodwill rather than simple obedience if labour power is to be converted to the

33: Information received from Bassa/Unite.

34: Fernie and Metcalf, 1997, p10.

35: Bain and Taylor, 2000.

maximum surplus value. Orwellian scenarios must therefore be tempered with an understanding of how workers fight back against such subjugation.

We must also consider the impact that WBC has had on the ability of employees to “turn the tables” on employers by monitoring and exposing employers’ own (mis)behaviour and corporate negligence.³⁶ Facebook and Twitter offer an unmediated and immediate tool for this “synoptic” effect and even a form of “reverse panopticon” whereby employer and corporate behaviour might be moderated. For individuals, the opportunity, means and propensity to whistleblow on the employer may be correspondingly enhanced, adding to already existing employer uncertainty towards policy approach. Most existing legislation on whistleblowing continues to be framed to address “conventional” forms. However, internet-based activity complicates matters. Instead of whistleblowing through third parties (such as the traditional media, trade unions, government regulators or employer-supported ‘hotlines’), WBC enhancement allows the immediate release of (unverified) information to a worldwide audience. Such information is therefore unmediated and unrestricted and has exploded not only in the Wikileaks/Bradley Manning/Julian Assange and Edward Snowden cases but also more generally in exposures of employer malpractice and corruption.

In presenting this counter-mobilising perspective, some commentators have returned to Foucault who links language, discourse and power in an “order of discourse”.³⁷ This perspective presents a case for opportunities for collective action from below in a process of “distributed discourse” enhanced by the networked effect of providing counter-information and campaigning against the hegemony wielded by capital in globalised production systems:

Global organisation and coordination need no longer be solely the province of large companies, governments and international agencies. Global communication is now a routine everyday practice and it provides for a new speed or velocity in campaigning and bargaining.³⁸

It is also claimed that distributed discourse has the power not only to upset power relations against corporations within the global economy but also in the trade unions as rank and file networks can utilise WBC to challenge the bureaucratic conservatism of trade union leaderships. An oft-quoted

36: Mathieson, 1997.

37: Foucault, 1972.

38: Hogan and others, 2010, p29.

example is the case of the long-running Liverpool dockers' dispute (1995–8), and their use of the internet to create solidarity networks beyond the shores of the UK. It was argued that a polyphonic discourse of the oppressed and excluded was the key to undermining authority because such diffused discourses “are different from the discourse of power”.³⁹ The order of discourse in trade unions, it is argued, is constructed by union leaders and expressed through channels of communication that reinforce leadership, hierarchical authority and the centralisation of power. The distributed discourse enabled by WBC, according to the model proposed by John Hogan and others, would thus break the cycle, and allow alternative voices to be heard from below and alternative discourses of struggle to emerge.⁴⁰

The advent of internet based communication, and then more interactive Web 2.0 technology, did spur a surge in trade union use of the web that allowed space for many commentators to champion the cause of *cyberunionism*. Contributions to these debates have been generally optimistic in terms of the potential of ICT and WBC to invigorate collective action.⁴¹ Shostak's recipe for cyberunionism encouraged unions to “get on board” the new information superhighway, promising a future which “enables unions to improve their image and vision of a successful 21st century union, including long-term goals, strategic options, and priorities needed to come closer to matching their profile”.⁴² This nirvana of trade union internet professionalism would be achieved through a programme of action that included—among other things—regular surveys of members' opinions “to learn in depth their needs and wants, their dreams and nightmares”, and to learn from the rank and file by regular email correspondence with union officers that ‘promises personal responses within 72 hours’.⁴³

Cyberunionism was the promised vehicle not only for enhancing the union's communications approach and sharpening debate about industrial strategy, but also a link to both a new wave global internationalism and a reinvigoration of the rank and file. A foremost advocate of internet internationalism is London-based Eric Lee, who established the LabourStart website in 1997 and had 500 subscribers a year later. The purpose of LabourStart was to provide a source of information and campaigning for global labour concerns and disputes. By 2010 the site had over 60,000 subscribers and was offered in 23 language editions with an average of 250 stories per day.

39: Hazen, 1993, p21, and Carter and others, 2003, p295.

40: Hogan and others, 2010.

41: Lee, 1996; Shostak, 1999; Freeman and Rogers, 2002.

42: Shostak, 1999, p125.

43: Shostak, 1999, p113.

PayPal is now used for solidarity fundraising. Alongside LabourStart, similar sites have emerged across the world such as Radio Labour, Labor Notes and UnionBook, some endorsed officially by trade union federations and some independent initiatives from labour activists.⁴⁴ Unions have also used WBC extensively in anti-corporate campaigning, a good example being Making Change at Walmart established by the United Food & Commercial Workers International union in the USA.⁴⁵ Trade unions themselves have also made extensive use of WBC employing the full range of multimedia to add impact. However, while union use of WBC has expanded, there are clear limitations to what “distributed discourse” can achieve, most especially with respect to strengthening the rank and file’s hand against conservative trade union bureaucracies.

A tool for rank and file activists?

To rehearse the argument, the proponents of “distributed discourse” suggest that WBC will enable rank and file union members to organise and to obstruct the dead hand of conservative trade union bureaucracies by spreading information and challenging “official” discourse. Or, as Hogan and others have argued, new distributed technologies might: “not only permit the reshaping of power between capital and labour but also permit the reshaping of power within the labour movement itself”.⁴⁶ However, there are a number of strong reasons to suggest this is far too optimistic a prediction. First, as Eric Lee himself has alluded to, there is a limit on the amount of information activists can digest and process, and internet fatigue may be apparent.⁴⁷ Second, as others have highlighted, the problems of virtual passivity encompassed in the phenomena of “clicktivism” and “slacktivism” may give us a false impression of the power of WBC to convert ideas into action. In this critique, real time, real space activity is substituted by passive, virtual and physically isolating activity to the extent it is enacted through screen and keyboard interaction alone. Slacktivism is cited by Evgeny Morozov as:

Feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in “slacktivist” campaigns an illusion of having a

44: For a review of various initiatives see Shoshtak, 2001.

45: Go to <http://makingchangeatwalmart.org/>

46: Hogan and others, 2010, p33.

47: Lee, 2006, p16.

meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group.⁴⁸

Micah White describes Clicktivism as a:

Model of activism [that] uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing. It accepts that the tactics of advertising and market research used to sell toilet paper can also build social movements. This manifests itself in an inordinate faith in the power of metrics to quantify success. Thus, everything digital activists do is meticulously monitored and analysed. The obsession with tracking clicks turns digital activism into clicktivism.⁴⁹

Third, and most importantly, in terms of collective workplace action and solidarity, we must assess the ability of WBC to transcend not just the content but more importantly the *form of power and authority* in trade unions.⁵⁰ A recent review of trade union use of the internet and WBC more generally concluded that trade union members are “more intense users of ICTs than their non-unionised counterparts”.⁵¹ However, the fact that union activists are more likely to use WBC should not automatically lead to the conclusion that unions will revive or that rank and file activists will be able to challenge union bureaucracies more effectively. We are under an illusion if we believe, for example, that only militant rank and file activists will make use of WBC. It is just as likely that trade union bureaucracies or right wing activists will effectively utilise information networks. Thus in the recent election for Unite general secretary Jerry Hicks and Len McCluskey both utilised the full range of platforms (websites, email listings, podcasts, videos, Facebook groups, tweets) to project their campaign. Sally Hunt, general secretary of the college lecturers’ union, UCU, utilised email surveys of members to attempt to reinforce her authority over the union’s left wing activists by circumventing branches and regional organisations and other democratic structures of the union.⁵²

Unite at official level used effective WBC to campaign against Willy Walsh and British Airways in the cabin crew dispute, including videos and spoof websites (“Brutish Airways”). A Facebook page was also established at

48: Morozov, 2009.

49: White, 2010.

50: Martinez Lucio, 2003.

51: Richards, 2010.

52: <http://socialistworker.co.uk/art/28308/UCU+conference+delegates+defend+their+union%26%2339%3Bs+democracy>

unofficial level in March 2010 called “Support BA cabin crew’s Democratic right to strike!” which drew in more than 3,500 “likes” (followers of the page).⁵³ The vast majority of posts on the site were supportive of the strikes, and the site regularly linked to press reports and, most importantly, fed full information of flight cancellations during strike days in an effort to counter the more customer “appropriate” tone and content communicated by BA management. A small minority of postings were hostile to the strikes, and went alongside a separate Facebook group for BA anti-strike “volunteers” established in May 2010. However, this particular site did not manage to take off and soon fell dormant with just ten “likes”. Probably the most important electronic forum used during the dispute remained the cabin crew union Bassa email forum, which acted to consolidate feelings of solidarity and give the geographically dispersed membership of Bassa a sense of common identity against the employer. Despite this internet battle the real power in the dispute rested on decisions taken at mass meetings of the cabin crew staff, but even this was not enough to ward off the ability of the Unite leadership under Tony Woodley to push through a deal with BA that compromised some of the demands established by the cabin crew themselves.

There are distinct limits to processes of distributed discourse. WBC may well act to engage more people in debate, and counter-information is spread and digested more quickly. But ability to challenge union hierarchies or change the direction of policy still rests with winning the majority argument in collective open debate. In this respect WBC may act as a useful tool to disseminate information and widen discussion, but may have distinct limitations in its ability to upset or transform democratic structures of debate and decision-making.

In conclusion we may argue that, far from being immaterial, the struggle over WBC and social media at the point of production is very much part of our material world. WBC and social media can be additional organisational tools in workers’ armoury against the employer and in the struggle for socialist ideas. However, it is not an open field. In particular, capital has mounted an offensive against subversion of its interests and has embraced WBC further to intensify work and close down the boundary between work time and personal time, and between the public and private sphere. As important to understand is that power to act within unions remains dependent (correctly so) on internal democratic procedures of decision-making. Social media, precisely because of its open and unmediated nature,

53: www.facebook.com/pages/Support-BA-Cabin-Crews-Democratic-right-to-strike/368528654694?ref=ts&fref=ts

is likely to be at odds with the principle of internal union democracy.⁵⁴ This is an especially important point if we wish to understand how the rank and file may use WBC to challenge both global capital and collaborative trade union leaderships. Rather than depend on the nirvana of WBC to rescue collective organisation we must recognise that rank and file independence and strength are based on really existing networks of militants based at the point of production, sharing and generalising from collective experience towards sectional and then cross-workplace solidarity. This implies a leap of consciousness for which historically the role of socialists as leaders of rank and file movements has proved crucial.⁵⁵ In such a situation face to face contact and argument, democratic debate and mass meetings are the life-blood of the social trust and reciprocity necessary to build a movement that transcends the virtual into the real.

54: Saundry and others, 2007

55: See Callinicos, 1982 for a review.

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